

An extralimital record of Grey-headed Honeyeater *Lichenostomus keartlandi* from Darwin, Northern Territory

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The Grey-headed Honeyeater *Lichenostomus keartlandi* is considered a bird of inland vegetation communities of arid and semi-arid Australia (Higgins *et al.* 2001). It is a resident or locally nomadic honeyeater endemic to northern inland Australia. Within the Northern Territory, its normal range is south of near Top Springs (16°32'37"S, 131°47'52"E) in the west and Mount Roper (14°48'59"S, 135°03'02"E) in the east (Storr 1977; Higgins *et al.* 2001). The species occurs in a variety of habitats, but primarily in low open eucalypt (including mallee) and mulga woodlands in sandstone ranges, rocky gorges, tablelands and plains; its habitat is dominated by low, stunted vegetation, often with spinifex ground cover (Higgins *et al.* 2001). It also occurs in inland riparian vegetation and less commonly in Mitchell grass dominated grasslands (Higgins *et al.* 2001).

Between approximately 1100 and 1130 hours on 21 February 2010, an adult Grey-headed Honeyeater was observed and photographed at East Point, Darwin, Northern Territory (12°24'23"S, 130°49'00"E) (Figure 1). This is *c.* 270 km (2°25') north of its previously documented range in northern Australia. The location of the sighting was in a human-modified coastal parkland/reserve, with a small patch of coastal monsoon forest (dominated by Beach Hibiscus *Hibiscus tiliaceus*) on the seaward side and a small area of adjacent tall eucalypts (dominated by Ghost Gum *Corymbia bella*) on the landward side, bounded to the south-east by a fence separating it from a horse paddock. The monsoon forest and eucalypt parkland were divided by a pedestrian and bicycle path (Figure 2).

This individual was identified as an adult by its generally bright and neat plumage, well-defined bright yellow plume extending behind and below the black posterior ear-coverts, well-contrasting dark (blackish) mask, grey head and completely black bill (Higgins *et al.* 2001). The bird was very active and was observed foraging primarily in Beach Hibiscus, where it searched leaves (presumably for insects), although it was also observed in Ghost Gums. During the observation period the bird aggressively chased, and was chased by, several Brown Honeyeaters *Lichmera indistincta* and a pair of Northern Fantails *Rhipidura rufiventris*.



Figure 1. Grey-headed Honeyeater *Lichenostomus keartlandi*, East Point, Darwin, 21 February 2010. Both photos are in Beach Hibiscus *Hibiscus tiliaceus*, the bottom alongside a Northern Fantail *Rhipidura rufiventris*. (Micha V. Jackson)



Figure 2. Location of Grey-headed Honeyeater *Lichenostomus keartlandi* sighting at East Point, Darwin, 21 February 2010. The bird frequented Ghost Gum *Corymbia bella* (foreground) and Beach Hibiscus *Hibiscus tiliaceus* (background left). (Micha V. Jackson)

A report of a Grey-headed Honeyeater from the same location was made on a local bird-watching website on 15 October 2009, about four months before the current observation. The earlier sighting was of a bird in the company of Banded Honeyeaters *Cissomela pectoralis*, of which there had been an influx into the Darwin region at that time (pers. obs.). Eucalypts were flowering at the East Point site in October 2009, attracting large numbers of honeyeaters (pers. obs.). The Grey-headed Honeyeater frequently feeds on the floral nectar of many flowering trees and shrubs (Ford & Paton 1976; Higgins *et al.* 2001) as well as foraging on insects. While both sightings possibly refer to the same individual, no observations were reported during the intervening period.

The Grey-headed Honeyeater is described as primarily sedentary, although it is also known to be locally nomadic (Higgins *et al.* 2001). Nomadic visitations, probably related to flowering events, have been noted in north-west Queensland (Liddy 1962), but overall, local and larger-scale movement patterns are poorly known. There is no documentation of extralimital occurrence in the species, but the Darwin records may be linked to movements related to resource availability. While these sightings provide

a new habitat association for the species (coastal monsoon forest dominated by Beach Hibiscus), the bird may have been attracted to the area by previous flowering of local eucalypts. The seasonal influx of Banded Honeyeaters into the Darwin region in the mid-late dry season of 2009 corresponded to local flowering (pers. obs.). The dominant eucalypt species at East Point, the Ghost Gum, flowers mainly from September to December (Brock 2001), and flowering *Corymbia* spp. (amongst a wide variety of flowering trees) are a noted food source of Grey-headed Honeyeaters (Higgins *et al.* 2001).

The normal range of the Grey-headed Honeyeater overlaps with that of the Banded Honeyeater in the southern part of the latter species' distribution (Higgins *et al.* 2001). It is possible that the Grey-headed Honeyeater at East Point had dispersed with Banded Honeyeaters, which undergo irregular coastward movements during the dry season in the Top End (the area roughly north of 15°S) of the Northern Territory (McCrie & Watson 2009). While the October 2009 sighting coincided with local flowering events, the second sighting did not, suggesting that if this was in fact the same individual, there were sufficient resources for it to remain in the area after flowering had ceased. The individual could not be relocated during weekly searches for the remainder of February and March 2010.

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